

Chapter 50

Beautiful

"Are you excited?!" Bren was practically vibrating with excitement when Ava opened the door. She bounced up and down on the balls of her feet, the large box of stuff she carried in her arms jiggling along with her every movement. Ava wished she had half the enthusiasm as her friend did for her first official date with Noah. His contract had only recently finished being finalized, and she was now his personal escort for the next however long he wanted her. And in a very short order, Ava was going to have more money than she could fathom, much less actually spend. It was all beginning to feel very real to her. She should have been ecstatic, but all she felt at the moment was nauseous. She gave Bren a poor approximation of a smile, "Mostly nervous, really."

Bren sighed and moved into the room, dumping the large box she held onto Ava's dresser. "I knew you would be," she reached into the box and picked up a shoebox-sized parcel wrapped in brown craft paper and topped with a bow. "That's why I brought out the big guns."

Ava gasped with delight, clapping her hands, "Is that what I think it is?"

A mischievous grin spread across Bren's face as Ava grabbed the package and ripped it open, "You think I'd come here with inferior goods? You deserve only the best for your big day!"

Ava barely acknowledged the sweet sentiment as she flung open the Tupperware container in her hands and took in the gooey, chocolatey, amazing-ness lying within, "Your mom's fudge brownies!"

Ava had one in her mouth practically before she'd had the conscious thought to take a bite. She sighed an affirming moan, as the brownie practically melted in her mouth, "How are they this good, every single time?"

Bren's grinned exuded self-satisfaction, as if she'd baked the delicious goods herself, "Secret family recipe. Lucky for you, this batch is all yours!"

Ava gulped down the rest of the brownie, shaking her head against the offer. All the while, her hand reached for another, "Bren, I couldn't..."

She waved her off, "Oh, yes you can. And you will!" Bren began rummaging through the box sitting on the dresser, pulling out different

beauty-centric odds and ends. Ava could barely make heads or tails of the litany of implements that quickly filled up the top of her dresser, but Bren looked absolutely sure of each item as she sorted them into neat groups.

"That's the fourth care package my mom's sent me this month. My will is strong, but alas, my flesh is weak," Bren sighed dramatically before abruptly turning to pin Ava with an incredulous look. "Do you know, the other day, Jared asked me if I really thought that thick thighs saved lives?"

Ava's eyes went wide as she froze with a brownie half-way to her mouth, "You're kidding?" She scoffed, "One, they do. And two? Jared can fuck right on off with that one."

Ava stuffed the brownie in her mouth and offered her friend the container. Bren laughed and took the offering, defiance replacing the glint of self-doubt that had crept into her perpetually warm eyes.

Bren was as beautiful on the outside as she was on the inside. She was sweet and funny, and one of the most non-judgmental people Ava had ever met. She was exactly the kind of person who'd receive weekly care packages of baked goods from their mother, and gleefully share them with others. The thought of anyone putting her down was as preposterous as it was unacceptable.

"Right on," Bren said, taking a bite of her own brownie. "After all of the shit he pulled, he's got a lot of nerve."

Ava nodded. Bren was the only person she'd confided in about the thing that had gone down in Room 701. She hadn't even gone into much detail with Bella about how the night had affected her.

It was ridiculous, but Ava couldn't help but feel a little betrayed by the mistress for letting such a monumental mistake slip between the club's many cracks. After everything Bella had done for her thus far, Ava felt guilty for feeling so put out, so she had made it a point to steer their conversations in lighter directions.

Bren, however, was a wholly unconnected, and sympathetic third party. And, to her friend's credit, after their initial deep dive, she'd never brought the incident up again. Ava was used to people walking on eggshells around her, for one reason or another. Bren showed her support by offering her a much-appreciated break from her mental load.

"Do you have any idea where he's taking you?" Bren asked.

Ava shook her head, "No clue. He's picking me up at Noon, though. So, it can't be too involved, right? What do people even do on regular dates?"

Bren laughed again and led Ava to take a seat at her vanity, before plugging in a curling iron. "When was the last time that you went on a date?" Ava sighed, "It's been...a while."

Unlike the incident in 701, Ava had elected to keep her past to herself. Partly, because she felt that admitting to a murder conviction was a lot to drop on someone, even someone as trusting as Bren. But, mostly, it was because Ava just didn't want to get into it again.

She couldn't stand the thought of tainting this fresh relationship with all of her past baggage. Ava scoffed. Her current baggage was more than enough.

Bren tilted Ava's face back and forth, contemplating whatever myriad of aspects went into making oneself date worthy. "Hmm, I think I know what I want to do. Doesn't really matter, though. You're such a stunner, I could send you off in a paper bag and he'd be sending me flowers."

The comment was off handed, but it touched Ava to her core. Bren clacked the curler's tongs together, testing the temperature, while Ava simply stared at her friend's reflection and smiled.

An hour and a half later, Ava stood in front of her full-length mirror twisting from side to side, so that she could see Bren's masterwork in all of its glory. She brought her hand to her hair, only to quickly retract her curious fingers when Bren gave her a pointed cough.

"Sorry! It just looks so...*nice*." Ava said in wonder.

"I know, right? You totally can't even tell that I've never done something like that before!"

Ava's eyebrows shot down as she turned to look at Bren, "Oh, good goddess."

Bren's eyes were wide as she nodded, "Yeah, that could've gone south fast. But it didn't! You look fantastic!"

Ava turned back to look at herself. Despite Bren's apparent lack of foreknowledge, she had to agree. Other than lopping off her own bangs with a pair of prison-approved safety scissors, Ava hadn't had a haircut in years. Bren had gone a step further and actually given her a proper hairstyle.

Ava's long hair now fell down her back in layers, making it look much fuller and giving it movement. Her shaggy bangs had been cut into curtains that framed each side of her face, and still adequately covered her scar. Bren had curled her hair into chunky ringlets and pulled half of it up into a perky ponytail, while the rest flowed freely in russet waves.

The magic didn't end with her hair, though. Bren had done a fantastic job with her makeup, layering soft powders and silky creams that somehow made it look as if she weren't wearing makeup at all, save for the glittery champagne-colored shadow on her eyes and the raspberry gloss on her lips.

Her skin had a healthy peach glow about it that could probably be attributed to the good fifteen pounds she'd put on over the last couple of months. Hours of dedicated weightlifting and Pilates with Bren had taken Ava from slim to lean.

Slowly, but surely, Ava was rebuilding the strength that had been so natural to her in her adolescence, and it showed. She like the way she now filled out the yellow sundress she'd ordered online a few weeks ago.

When it had first arrived, it hung off of Ava as much as anything else had, so she'd put it back in its box and stowed it away without a second thought. Now, she couldn't see the ridges of her spine through the open back, and the bow nestled into the curvature of her lower back.

She'd finished her outfit off with a pair of powder blue ankle-strap sandals that she'd bought on impulse, just like ninety percent of her shoe collection. A soft pink mani-pedi brought the ensemble together.

Bren clapped her hands together, utterly pleased with the results, "You're so friggin' cute!"

Ava blinked hard, willing away the burning behind her eyes, "You're a miracle worker, Bren." She wrapped the other girl in a tight hug, squeezing tighter when Bren hugged her back. "Seriously, I haven't felt like this in a really long time." Bren pulled back, confused, "Like what?"

Ava swallowed, "Beautiful."

Sadness clouded Bren's expression only briefly before she suddenly brightened. "That's nothing a good spa night can't fix!" She gestured to the beauty supplies littering the counters, "If you think I spend a lot of money on this stuff, don't even get me started on my serums."

Ava pulled a shocked face, "Goddess, there's more?"

Bren scoffed, "Hell yeah, dude! Skincare is in my *blood*. The next time my grandmother sends me a care package from Seoul, hand to the goddess, it'll change your life."

She picked up another brownie and bit into it, "Besides, suffering through a good ten to fourteen-step routine will make up for all the cardio you make me do."

Ava gave her a wicked grin just as a knock sounded at her door. Her heart began to beat faster as she opened it. On the other side was a guard holding a giant bouquet of wildflowers. "Mr. Thomas is ready to see you now."